

So who am I really? Personal identity in the age of the Internet

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Abstract The Internet has become a field of dragon teeth for a person's identity. It has made it possible for your identity to be mistaken by a credit agency, spied on by the government, foolishly exposed by yourself, pilloried by an enemy, pounded by a bully, or stolen by a criminal. These harms to one's integrity could be inflicted in the past, but information technology has multiplied and aggravated such injuries. They have not gone unnoticed and are widely bemoaned and discussed. The government and private watchdogs are working to protect the identity of citizens though at least in the United States both the government and individuals all too often side with prosperity when it conflicts with privacy. Still, these information-technological threats to identity have been recognized and can be reasonably met through legislation, regulation, and discretion. There is another kind of danger to our identity that is more difficult to define and to meet, for it has no familiar predecessors, has no criminal aspects, and exhibits no sharp moral or cultural contours. Still that threat to our identity haunts us constantly and surfaces occasionally in conversations and the media. It makes us feel displaced, distracted, and fragmented at the very times when to all appearances we seem to be connected, busy, and energetic. At the same time, the culture of technology, and of information technology particularly, has opened up fields of diversity and contingency that invite us to comprehend our identities in newly responsible, intricate, and open-minded ways.

Keywords Internet · Personal identity · Suger of St. Denis · European Enlightenment · Kantian autonomy · Cyber space

1 Reflections

To understand personal identity today is not an easy task because the technological transformation of our identities has proceeded gradually and almost invisibly. The progress of technology has its own plausible logic, and the culture we have created according to that logic is so familiar as to be invisible. But history as a canvas and philosophy as a pen can help us to trace the lineaments of the technological culture and its effects on personal identity.

The beginning of the modern era is the great fault line in human history. Its tremors started locally, though its consequences have been global if unevenly so. For the sake of economy, I will call the initial event of modern culture the Enlightenment and its transformative force Technology. In premodern times, neither societies nor individuals had a problem of identity. Instead, they had a destiny. Consider as an example a person of the Christian Middle Ages. Suger of St. Denis was the son of a minor noble family and came to be one of the politically and culturally most powerful men of twelfth-century France. But he understood that the course of his life was providential. He was an *oblatus*, a child offered to a monastery and destined to become a monk. But rather than complain about his lot and the lack of self-determination, he looked on his destiny with gratitude. In his account "On What Was Done under His Administration," Suger paid tribute to his "mother church which with maternal affection had suckled me as a child, had held me upright as a stumbling youth, had mightily strengthened me as a mature man, and had

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